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STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM  
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JERUSALEM ALSO FOR ICD  
LONDON ALSO FOR HKANONA AND POL  
PARIS ALSO FOR POL  
ROME FOR MFO  
E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: IS\_KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT  
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

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SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:  
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11. Mideast  
12. Syrian-Lebanese Track

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Key stories in the media:  
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Leading media reported that newly confirmed Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with FM Silvan Shalom at the White House on Wednesday. Israel Radio reported that Secretary Rice intends to be more active than her predecessor in efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Leading media reported that Secretary Rice will come to Jerusalem in one month.

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Israel Radio reported that she is due to meet with Sharon's adviser Dov Weisglass during the weekend. Jerusalem Post and the radio reported that Secretary Rice and FM Shalom discussed the creation of a U.S.-mediated mechanism that would be applied in case of disagreements or crises between Israel and the PA. Shalom reportedly raised Israel's demand that the Palestinians act to put an end to terrorism and not be content with a cease-fire. The radio said that during the meeting, Shalom also raised the issue of the Iranian threat, asking the U.S. to make efforts to get the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on Iran. Israel Radio quoted Shalom as saying that if the Shas party does not enter PM Sharon's coalition, the government will have fewer chances of surviving. Leading media reported that Israel expects to obtain U.S. aid in funding the implementation of the disengagement plan, and that earlier this week Foreign Ministry D-G Ron Prosor and Israel's Ambassador to Washington Danny Ayalon have discussed the issue with U.S. officials. Ayalon was quoted as saying in an interview with Ha'aretz that the U.S. will help Israel cover the expenses involved in transferring its forces from bases in Gaza to new ones inside Israel, and that Jerusalem has yet to make any formal request in this regard. Jerusalem Post quoted Israeli officials as saying that the White House would announce any new funding for Israel.

Leading media reported on the beginning of A/S William Burns's visit to Israel. Ha'aretz and Israel Radio reported that last night Burns, Vice Premier Shimon Peres, EU envoy Marc Otte, and the World Bank's representative in the territories, Nigel Roberts, discussed the removal of checkpoints and other economic issues concerning the Palestinians. Israel Radio reported that Burns will meet with Sharon today. Ha'aretz and Israel Radio reported that Peres will meet with PA Finance Minister Salam Fayyad at the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland, on Friday to begin discussing economic cooperation in the framework of the disengagement plan. All media reported on current progress in Israel-PA relations. PM Sharon was quoted as saying in an interview with Shimon Shiffer of Yediot: "Abu Mazen has undoubtedly started to work. I am very pleased by what I am hearing on the Palestinian side, and I am very interested in furthering the moves with him." Ha'aretz reported that Sharon will meet with PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Palestinian PM Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala) in about two weeks and present a package of steps and goodwill gestures to help strengthen the new leadership and encourage them to continue efforts to prevent terror. Israel Radio reported that a joint Israeli-Palestinian tourism exhibit is currently on show in Madrid.

Ha'aretz reported that in a preparatory meeting on Wednesday, between aides of Sharon, Abbas, and Qurei, the Palestinians emphasized the importance of freeing prisoners. The Israelis said they understood the Palestinian position, and that they would examine the request in the context of progress made in achieving quiet on the ground. Maariv reported that Israel has acceded to Abbas's request that senior wanted Palestinians Tawfiq Tirawi and Rashid Abu Shabak be granted freedom of movement. Leading media reported that PA security official Muhammad Dahlan will meet with Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz next week to resume hudna discussions that began in the summer of 2003 about the IDF quitting the West Bank's city centers, which would take place once the Palestinians hand over a detailed security plan and say they can take responsibility. Ha'aretz notes that the Israelis have been much more serious in discussing their security plans than they were in 2003. Leading media reported that Wednesday the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades threatened to resume their attacks against Israel, following the killing by IDF forces of two of their members in Qalqilya.

Ha'aretz and Yediot reported that on Wednesday Attorney General Menachem Mazuz decided that all land managed by the Israel Lands Administration, including land owned by the Jewish National Fund, will be marketed without discrimination or limits including to non-Jews.

The media continued their extensive coverage of the 60th anniversary commemorations of the liberation of the death camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where dozens of world leaders, including U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney and President Moshe Katsav, will attend a ceremony this afternoon. The media reported that at a special Knesset session Wednesday, Sharon warned against "new anti-Semites" who are focusing on Israel and portraying it as "Nazi" in its war against Palestinian terror. Jerusalem Post quoted Katsav as saying that there are no guarantees against another Holocaust "in future generations." Leading media cited a proclamation issued by President Bush on Tuesday, stating that the occasion is an opportunity to pass along lessons of the Holocaust to the future.

Leading media reported that a 3-year-old Palestinian girl was killed by IDF fire in the center of the Gaza Strip on Wednesday. The IDF claims she was killed by a Qassam rocket.

All media reported that some 100 settlers from the Katif Bloc violently disrupted a meeting Wednesday afternoon between IDF officers and Palestinian police officers at the crossing near Khan Yunis. Yediot headlined: "The Palestinians Came to Fight Terror and Were Attacked by Settlers." Leading media reported that Likud Knesset members, activists of the party's central committee, and settler leaders Wednesday urged Sharon to hold a national referendum before the disengagement. Israel Radio noted that fewer people than expected attended the meeting.

Ha'aretz and Israel Radio reported that at a gathering in Jerusalem on Wednesday, dozens of mostly religious soldiers and officers, settlers, and those identifying with religious Zionism publicized their firm promise not to refuse orders.

All media reported that the courts have permitted publication of the main suspicions against Iyad Khaled al-Ashwah, the Lebanese-born Danish citizen who was arrested on January 6 on suspicion of having been sent to Israel by Hizbullah to gather intelligence about security installations and to recruit Israeli Arab agents. Maariv quoted Mofaz as saying at a press conference in London Wednesday that Hizbullah possesses missiles capable of striking Tel Aviv.

Yediot reported that "senior Americans" have conveyed a suggestion to Syrian President Bashar Assad that he return to Israel the remains of MIA Zecharia Baumel, an AmCit who disappeared during the 1982 Lebanon War, so that he can tell the Arab public that he returned the body of an American, which could be interpreted as a confidence-building measure.

Ha'aretz reported that under pressure by Jewish groups, Columbia University announced on Wednesday that it was postponing "indefinitely" a conference on the renewal of the Middle East peace process, scheduled to have taken place today. The newspaper quoted officials in New York as saying that the timing of the conference was suspect, because the university promised to publish at this time findings of the inquiry into accusations

of racist comments by professors of Middle Eastern origin against Jewish students. The Jewish officials were quoted as saying that the conference, which was initiated by former U.S. senator George Mitchell, was a "transparent attempt to deflect attention away from the severity of the accusations." Ha'aretz and Jerusalem Post reported that Ambassador Ayalon pulled out of the conference before the postponement announcement.

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**11. Mideast:**  
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Summary:  
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Liberal op-ed writer Ofer Shelach opined in the editorial of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "It now turns out, in a totally predictable manner, that the only IDF that the settlers recognize is an aggressive and occupying IDF, not an IDF that dares to reach agreements with the enemy."

Independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized: "The decision by ... the IDF ... to disperse soldiers from the hesder yeshivas [in which yeshiva students combine military service with religious studies] throughout the army ... was correct and courageous."

Liberal columnist Meron Benvenisti wrote in Ha'aretz: "In a reversal of roles, the Left is now nurturing the paranoia of the 'demographic demon' and writing its own charm for it: a withdrawal from populated territories while continuing to discriminate collectively against the Arab citizens of Israel."

Block Quotes:  
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**I. "The Skin is Coming Off"**

Liberal op-ed writer Ofer Shelach opined in the editorial of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (January 27): "As the date for the implementation of the disengagement plan draws near, the sides are shedding their skin.... On Wednesday settlers from the Katif Bloc attacked Palestinian police who came to hold a coordination meeting with IDF commanders prior to transferring responsibility over the southern Gaza Strip to them. After that they also clashed with the police who came to disperse their violent demonstration. The rioters did not conceal the fact that although this was the implementation on the ground of an agreement between the IDF and the Palestinian Authority, at the orders of the political echelon, this did not change a thing in their eyes. They thus made it clear that the state's institutions exist on condition -- the condition being that they serve their worldview.... And it now turns out, in a totally predictable manner, that the only IDF that the settlers recognize is an aggressive and occupying IDF, not an IDF that dares to reach agreements with the enemy.... It is very unlikely that the Gaza Strip settlers are winning any political converts by this manner of combat, but it appears that they have long since moved beyond a political battle.... From now and until the implementation of the plan, the battle is actually over the government's ability to enforce its decisions. On Wednesday we received a clear hint that this battle will not only be waged by democratic means."

**II. "Dismantling the Arrangement"**

Independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized (January 27): "The decision by Maj. Gen. Elazar Stern, commander of the IDF Manpower Branch, to disperse soldiers from the hesder yeshivas [in which yeshiva students combine military service with religious studies] throughout the army and not allow them to continue serving in religiously homogeneous companies and regiments was correct and courageous. Over the years, the hesder yeshivas have changed from an instrument used to encourage religious youth to enlist in the army to a separatist, inegalitarian phenomenon that could even be dangerous for the army and society.... The decision is particularly appropriate now, before the disengagement, and in light of letters from individuals and groups in the religious Zionist community promising that they will refuse orders to take part in the disengagement, and calls by some rabbis to refuse orders."

### III. "Beware the Demographic Demon"

Liberal columnist Meron Benvenisti wrote in Ha'aretz (January 27): "Every now and then, with inexplicable timing, we suddenly encounter rumors that the demographic demon -- the one that lies in the recesses of the Arab woman's womb -- has raised its head once again and is threatening to wipe out, God forbid, the entire Zionist enterprise.... The right-wing circles have discovered that the demographic demon had been abducted from them, and is being used by others to justify the evacuation of the Gaza Strip; and if the demon doesn't serve the purposes of the right, one has to pretend that it doesn't exist. In a reversal of roles, the Left is now nurturing the paranoia of the 'demographic demon' and writing its own charm for it: a withdrawal from populated territories while continuing to discriminate collectively against the Arab citizens of Israel."

#### 12. Syrian-Lebanese Track:

##### Summary:

Middle East affairs commentator Guy Bechor, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center, wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "For the first time since coming to power, Bashar Assad must decide quickly which direction to take: a confrontation or an arrangement with Israel and his new neighbor, the U.S. in Iraq. Any delay is liable to hurt him first, his credibility and the chances of his survival."

##### Block Quotes:

##### "The Syrian Split Personality"

Middle East affairs commentator Guy Bechor, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center, wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (January 27): "Fear has become the dominant component in the past two years in making decisions in Syria, and in recent weeks, it has bordered on obsession. The Syrians are convinced that in the next few months there will be a military attack on them from either the U.S. or Israel.... The more pragmatic stream in the Syrian leadership -- for example, the person designated to be foreign minister, Walid el-Mualem, or chief of staff Ali Habib, who knows exactly just how unprepared his army is for war -- advocate appeasing the Americans and urgently embarking on some sort of diplomatic process with Israel. Such negotiations, even if they never come to fruition, are meant to provide a bridge to the future, and immunity from an American attack. An important question in this regard has to do with the role of the Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders in Damascus, and the answer is unknown. Both these approaches do not reflect a real change in Syrian policy. There is no possibility for such change as long as the separatist and unpopular Alawite minority rules by force of might over the Sunni minority, and as long as in neighboring Iraq a change is taking place at this very moment that will turn the ruling minority into being ruled themselves. Nonetheless, for the first time since coming to power, Bashar Assad must decide quickly which direction to take: a confrontation or an arrangement with Israel and his new neighbor, the U.S. in Iraq. Any delay is liable to hurt him first, his credibility and the chances of his survival."

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